

WILDLANDS TRUST

They paved paradise and put up a parking lot

by Kate Bavelock

Photography by David Grossman

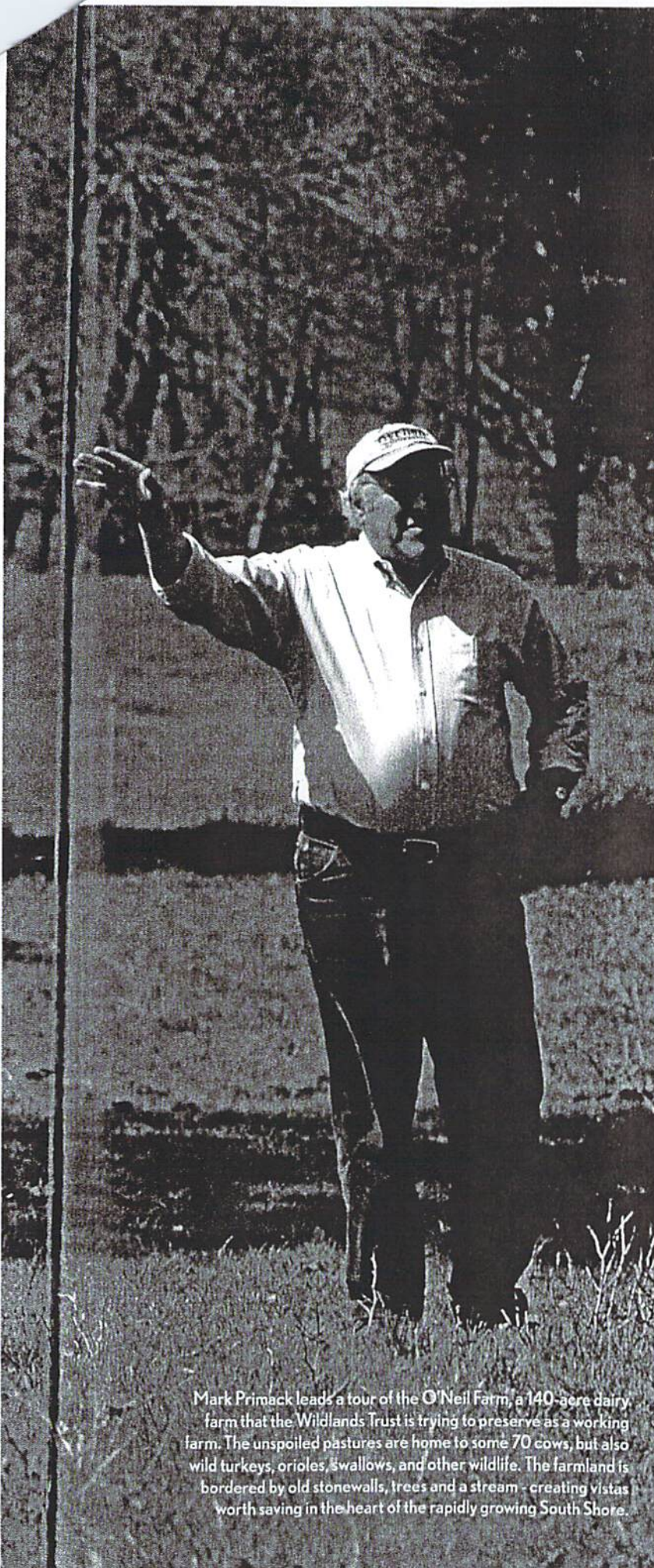
Who speaks for the trees, demanded Dr. Seuss' Lorax.

Mark Primack, Helen Philbrick and the other dedicated stewards of the land at the Wildlands Trust of Southeastern

Massachusetts speak for the trees, and the streams, pastures and peaceful places. They have one eye on encroaching subdivisions, shopping centers, and widening roads and the other eye on the remaining land of the South Shore. They know the race is on and the time is short. They act with lawyers, environmentalists, millionaires and communities to put aside whatever land they can under conservation restrictions. Their success rate is impressive; some \$20 million worth of land totaling more than 4,000 acres. Who are these superheroes of conservation?

The answer may surprise you.

Helen Philbrick has hardly slowed down at the age of 95. She does Tai chi, weaves a huge number of beautiful shawls on her loom, rides her exercise bike while reading and teaches the lost art of chair caning. But despite her multitude of hobbies, her most steadfast love and energy goes into the Wildlands Trust, of which she is a founding member and current benefactress. The Trusts' office is in her barn, which she donated with her house and land to the organization. She retains a life tenancy in the house.



Mark Primack leads a tour of the O'Neil Farm, a 140-acre dairy farm that the Wildlands Trust is trying to preserve as a working farm. The unspoiled pastures are home to some 70 cows, but also wild turkeys, orioles, swallows, and other wildlife. The farmland is bordered by old stonewalls, trees and a stream - creating vistas worth saving in the heart of the rapidly growing South Shore.



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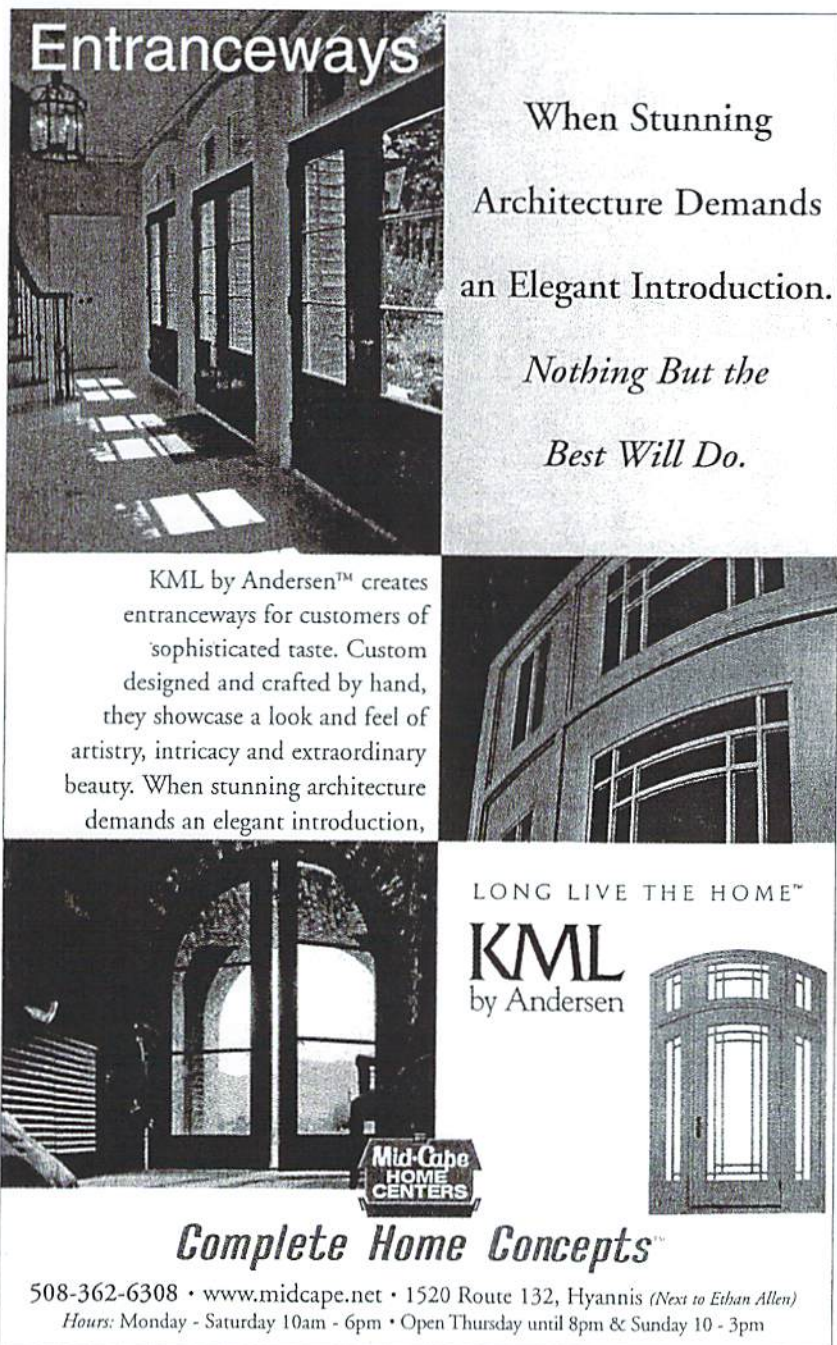
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Helen was married to John, an Episcopal rector who passed away some years ago. They were organic farmers before anyone had even defined the term, "We were just doing what our parents and grandparents did." Partly it was to save money, but also they could see it was the best way for the animals and the soil, explained Helen. Upon taking over St. John the Evangelist in Duxbury, the Philbricks bought the little house with ten acres and a barn.

They kept goats and chickens and grew vegetables. Those were good years for the Philbricks, "We were trying to think about what we could do to be useful and to have fun. Or maybe it was to have fun first and be useful second," laughs Helen. Of the goats, "they ate the \$5 rose bushes but left the \$2 rose bushes — very good taste. We would call 'first goat' and Lizzie would jump up on the table for milking and so on with the second. Now of course, the goat room is Mark's office," she says with a twinkle.

They came to serious interest in land preservation the hard way when John, newly retired, fell ill and Helen was forced to sell five acres of their property to pay bills. "The man promised me he wouldn't build on the land. I had it in writing. When houses went up I called him. He said, 'I'm not building on the land, the builders are,'" says Helen visibly still angry after all these years.

In 1973 they saw a newspaper article about a group of concerned citizens getting together in Plymouth to plan ways to set aside land in the face of rapid growth. They met in a conference room of the small Plymouth airport. The first piece of property they legally preserved was the Emery property off Long Pond road in Plymouth.

The group was able to add to their holdings and was blessed with several lawyers on the board who could make preservation stick, unlike the Philbrick's earlier experience. After John passed away Helen was using the barn for a

weaving studio and decided to donate it as office space for the growing trust, along with the surrounding five acres.

FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS TO A REGIONAL POWERHOUSE

"Eight years ago I accepted the newly created position of executive director of the Wildlands Trust when it was making the move from all volunteer to professionally run. I was the Assistant Secretary for Transportation for Environmental Policy and wanted to slow down. I really thought this job was going to be running a sleepy little environmental organization," laughs Primack. "I was here one week and I saw the enormous potential to lose everything we love to development and I thought uh-oh, this job is not the stress-free job I thought I was getting into." His fear was that the new commuter rail would open a floodgate of development to this corner of New England. "I went

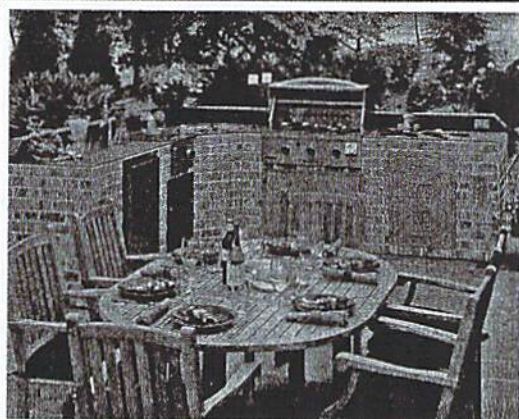
to every town planning meetings in the area and blew a wooden train whistle. Whoo whoo! The train is coming," says Primack of his early attention-getting exploits.

Despite dashed expectations of a semi-retirement from the rat race, Primack obviously relishes every minute of his work. He absolutely beams when showing off the unspoiled vista of hay meadow on a recent tour. This particular meadow is part of the 140-acre O'Neil Farm, the Trust's most ambitious preservation project yet and a new arena for them, preserving a working dairy farm to be farmed in perpetuity.

Primack grew up in Newton and although his parents were not outdoorsy types, a wooded lot abutted their home where Primack and his brother played many happy hours, "the best part of my childhood was exploring those woods." He credits that small bit of land with his career decision and laughs that not



Helen Philbrick, a grande dame of the organic movement from its earliest days, has donated her barn and land to house the offices of the Wildlands Trust.

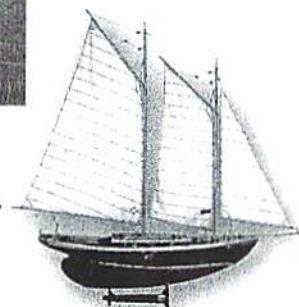


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many Jewish men from Newton went into environmental preservation. The only two he can think of are himself and his brother, an environmental botanist in Boston.

Primack took a large cut in pay to come work here, but the rewards are many,

including the house on Bluefish River that came with the job. It is in the most sought after part of town, a nicely proportioned old home with generous porches and stunning views that was part of the original Alden family homestead. An Alden descendent built the

house whose heir married into the Cushman family. When Lura Cushman had no heirs she arranged for the sale of the home and the land. Duxbury being Duxbury, she heard within an hour that the prospective buyer had plans to subdivide and build several houses on the site. She called the Trust and offered them the land. The story illustrates not only the wealth of the Trust's holdings, but also a problem they face when old houses come with the land. "When I got here eight years ago the Trust was spending all their time on maintaining these old homes that were given to us as part of land donations. I said, 'Let's forget about the houses, that's not our primary mission.'" Some were sold off, two are now staff housing, and two houses are occupied by the donors with a life tenancy.

Another major change Primack made was opening up the land to the public. "When I came none of the properties





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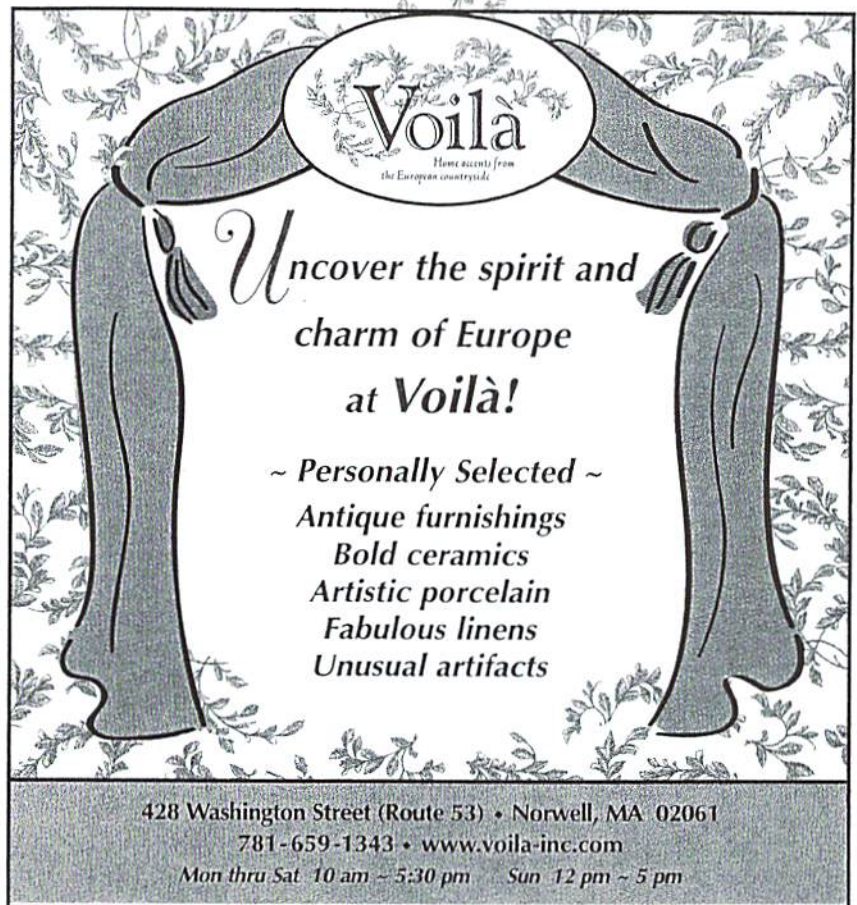

were marked. They were kind of hidden." His decision to create signs and trails and open the land to the public was a very deliberate weighing of principals versus practical concerns. Although the public can now enjoy the land, it also puts the Trust in the position of being 'park rangers' who have to clean up and police the open trails. For Primack the benefits outweigh the costs and a new staff member and volunteers make the maintenance possible.

Primack's experience, connections and passion have developed the organization into a regional powerhouse that has not lost its roots, "People trust us. We have a low overhead and we haven't become fancy and slick as we've grown. People know when they give us their land we will preserve it the way they intended." Primack is currently the chair of a statewide landtrust coalition and works hard to build consensus for the mission. "We need active state and federal partners. We work on a balanced vision for the region. I am very dedicated to saving land, my personal and professional life revolve around it, but I also believe people need jobs and housing. I am not a fanatic, this is not a fanatical organization," says Primack.

Primack is concerned that their headquarters and high-profile projects in Duxbury will give them a misleading label. In contrast, Primack points out, he is especially proud of the land they have preserved along the river in a fully developed area of Taunton. "We are a regional organization with property in three counties," he points out.

The Wildlands Trust buys some properties outright through funds they raise, some properties are donated and some properties are deemed "community projects" meaning the Trust will offer advice, counsel and support but the community must come up with the funds. The properties they purchase are selected for either biological significance or community significance, i.e.

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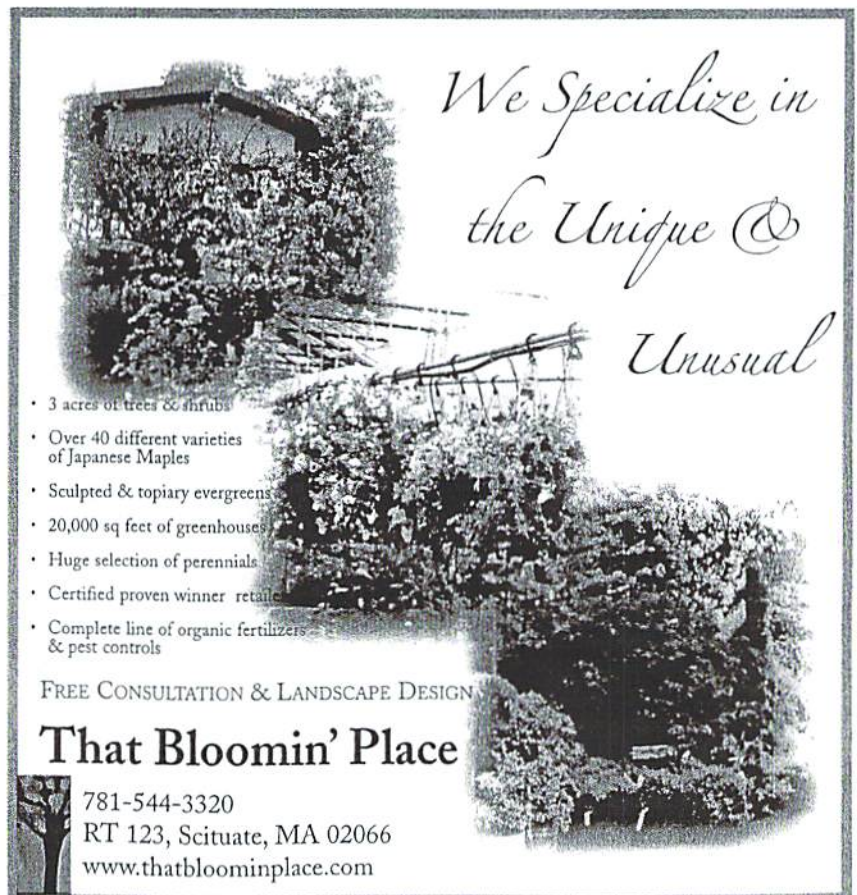


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major impact on the neighborhood if they are lost to development.

Often times the settlement of an estate leaves the heirs with very little money after taxes, making donation an attractive option. "It's either give it to us or give it to Uncle Sam and if you have a sentimental attachment to your land, you'll give it to us," says Primack. Developers also can be generous land donors. When they give a multi-acre parcel they can take a tax deduction that helps offset their profits from the land they build on.

YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'VE GOT 'TIL IT'S GONE

Carl O'Neil's family has been dairy farming in Duxbury for over 100 years, and others were farming it before them. The farmhouse dates back to 1760. Right now there are some 70 cows, 40 milkers, producing 150 gallons of milk a day.

O'Neil worked the farm his whole life, sharing ownership with his brother Bill until he passed away recently. Knowing none of the children wanted the farm in the future, O'Neil called Primack. Primack had been in touch for years letting them know if they ever want to sell the last remaining dairy farm on the South Shore, the Trust was very interested. Out of fairness to the heirs, the farm will be purchased below market value but provides them with estate tax benefits. O'Neil will retain a lifetime tenancy in the farmhouse and will donate his share of the sale's profits to a foundation that will administer the farm. His one stipulation is that the land will always remain farmland.

The Trust hasn't made any final decisions yet about the specific future of the farm. They know it will have an educational component where school children can come see a working farm in action. They know there is room for hiking trails on the outskirts of the beautiful pastures bordered by wood-

lands and old rock walls. They know there is a way of life worth preserving that new generations can learn from.

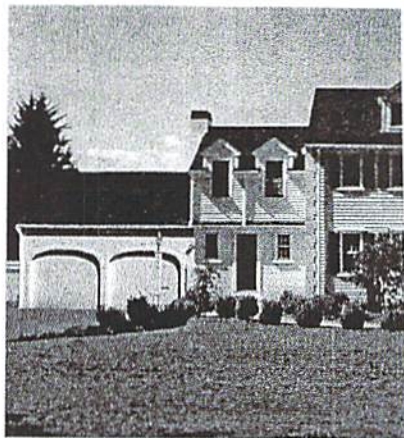
Will it have a milk delivery business component? Will it have a gift shop? Will it have goats and a cheesemaking room? Nothing has been ruled out. To their great pleasure the Trust had a soil analysis done and found out all of the land has a high rating for nutrients and fertility. Therefore there is no limit as to what may be grown there should the new managing foundation decide to move away from dairy into something else.

The funding formula for the farm is an unusual convergence of state, town, grant and donated funds. A total of \$4.3 million is needed. \$1.5 million is being requested from Community Preservation Funds pending town meeting approval. Over \$1 million has already come from private donors. A half-million dollars is being sought from the Massachusetts Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program. In addition to deep-pockets donors, Primack is soliciting small donations as well. If families send in \$20 or school children run a nickel-collecting drive the whole town will feel ownership of this land and pride in its purchase, reasons Primack.

Although it is a huge project and they have a long way to go, Primack remains confident they will get there. "We have to make this happen. There is no other choice. I don't like to use the word tragedy lightly, but if that farm gets turned into another subdivision it will truly be a tragedy. It is the last working farm on the South Shore. Once we lose it we lose any possibility of recreating any piece of our agricultural heritage."

"We have become so mechanized we have forgotten our connection to the land," says Philbrick with a quiet urgency, "It's gradually getting a little better. But it's tough. The land is so important to us."

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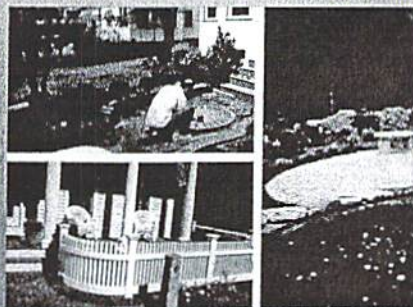


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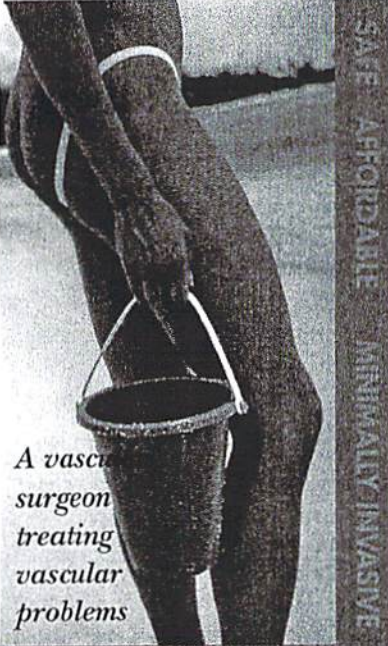


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There are some great perks to this job. No, I don't mean the kind of perks that got Martha Stewart and Connecticut Governor John Rowland into hot water. The perk I mean is a recent shift in my thinking. Because I get to spend my days talking to people about what interests them and where the stories are, I see opportunity everywhere. I see quiet heroes everywhere. I see people of action. I see people who have not let life pass them by, but rather shaped their world according to their heart. Every morning I wonder, who will I meet today and what will I learn from them? People that I may have met before, I see with new eyes. Everyone has a story, and I am so impressed with each one I hear.

Take, Helen Philbrick, for example. She could be anyone's neighbor, an older woman, fond of her dog and active in her church. In our article on the Wildlands Trust of Southeastern Massachusetts, we learn so much more. She shares with us her commitment to land preservation and her love of nature that has shaped her life's path in fascinating ways. Or, Mary Jane Hayes, the photographer who called me to say, 'would you like to do a photo essay of boating in Scituate Harbor?' As we put together the piece Sweet Summer Day I

was delighted to find among the things we had in common was a philosophy how time spent on the water is one of the best ways to strengthen family ties. Of course the fun, adventure and fresh air are added bonuses.

Science photographer Dana Lipp is someone you may pass in the grocery store without a second glance. But if you could read his mind he would be thinking something like, "I wonder if a magnified view of wilted lettuce would have a much different texture than fresh?" And you would be intrigued and want to know more about how this guy thinks. Same thing for Bob English. On the surface he is like so many people you know, your child's teacher perhaps, or some guy from the accounting department. But would you know how that person spends their weekends? Mowing the lawn? No, in Bob's case, he spends every free moment and every spare cent amassing one of the premiere collections of automobile memorabilia in the country.

Join me this issue in uncovering the depth and variety of human lives in our community. These are opportunities you won't want to miss.

Kate Barlock